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ABSTRACT

Effective management of time is described from a cultural viewpoint, using examples from four case studies based on a one-year research project on college and university decision-making. Three dimensions of time in colleges and universities are important: formal/informal; historical; and seasonal/ceremonial. The environment, external constituencies, historical traditions, and participants all influence organizational time. The concepts of formal and informal uses of time can be illustrated by a president's "open door" policy and the formalized procedures of a unionized faculty. Historical time places present actions in the context of the organizational past. Seasonal and ceremonial time generates activities that demand administrative awareness of the culture. Time can be viewed as a critical element in an organization's socially constructed reality. The view accounts for how society affects change and how the inner processes of the organization focus time within larger spheres. Institutional conflict can be precipitated by different frames of time being in tension with one another (e.g., a traditionally slow-changing institution can come into conflict with a rapidly changing environment). It is concluded that managers who assess their colleges from a cultural viewpoint can better understand how to effectively manage time. (SW)

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THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF TIME MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The Cultural Context of Time Management in Higher Education

Abstract

This paper describes the effective management of time from a cultural viewpoint. The author provides examples from four case studies drawn from a year-long research project on college and university decision making. Three dimensions of time in colleges and universities are considered: formal/informal; historical; and seasonal/ceremonial. Viewing the nature of collegiate institutions as organizational cultures can help managers develop more effective ways of managing time.

The Cultural Context of Time Management in Higher Education

Effective management often depends on the effective use of time. Previous research on time management reflects the common perception that time is composed of discrete, instrumental units. Acts that occur in time are viewed as a succession of decision-making events, advancing in a linear progression. In their study of presidential leadership, for example, Cohen and March [4] created a time-allocation study that divided twenty-four hour days into half-hour periods. Within each period they coded how presidents spent their time in terms of where they went, with whom they talked, and so on. Cohen and March chose two dates in April--a Tuesday and a Friday--to gather their data. In The Nature of Managerial Work Henry Mintzberg [11] created a similar scale to analyze what managers do and how they spend their time.

Practical studies have provided managers with prescriptions for managing time. Whetten and Cameron [15] advise managers to "hold all short meetings standing up," and "meet visitors to your office outside in the doorway," and "cancel meetings once in a while" (p. 107). Mackenzie [10] calls upon management theory to help extricate harried managers from "the time trap." At one point he suggests, "write down the most important tasks you have to do tomorrow and number them in order of importance" (p. 38). Purvis [14], Oncken and Wass [12], and Lakein [8] likewise provide guidelines for a manager's more effective use of time.

This essay offers an alternative view of effective time management. It argues that the concept of organizational culture provides a useful framework within which to consider the use of time in administrative settings. Proceeding from the notion that organizations are socially constructed, the essay considers time management as a cultural construct, and differentiates between individual time and organizational time. We suggest that higher-education administrators can improve time management not only by applying fixed guidelines but, equally importantly, by diagnosing their institutions from a cultural perspective.

Culture and Time

The research mentioned at the outset of this article considers time management from an individually-based orientation. Berger, Berger, and Kellner [1] comment on this perspective by saying, "Modern technology and modern bureaucracy presuppose temporal structures that are precise, highly quantifiable, (and) universally applicable" (p. 149). From this viewpoint modern organizations commoditize time so that it can be "spent," "wasted," "saved," "shared," and "used up." A modern manager, for example, is likely to rely on formalized scheduled meetings that begin and end at specified points in time.

Another way to think about time is to view an organization as a social construction that is dialectical, based on a continuous interaction between the organizational

participants' constructed reality and impinging social forces. Clifford Geertz writes, "The close and immediate interdependency between conceptions of person, time, and conduct is...a general phenomenon.... Such an interdependency is inherent in the way in which human experience is organized, a necessary effect of the conditions under which human life is led" [7, p. 408]. Viewing time as an element of an organization's socially constructed reality, with its own inherent rules, opens up an alternative way to think about both individual and organizational time.

Elusive, abstract, and culturally relative as it may seem, organizational time undoubtedly conditions the success of administrators' time management practices. The point of this essay is not to generalize that good managers hold short meetings standing up and bad managers sit down, or that good managers are punctual and bad managers are not. We also do not deny the importance of administrative time management practices; however, we intend to demonstrate how individual time management practices need to be understood within a cultural context. Organizational culture often determines why a decision is successful in one college and fails in another. Similarly, the way administrators spend their time can be effective at one university and inefficient elsewhere because of the cultural context of time.

Prevalent among Western cultures is the notion that people fill in blocks of time, that a particular day or time period is when we must fulfill a given act. The ubiquitous

desk calendar has so narrowed our perspective that we now see time as organizing life rather than viewing a community's life as organizing a rich and diverse set of temporal patterns. If we move away from a linear assumption about temporality, than how might we consider organizational time? What does it mean for time to be socially constructed, and what are the consequences of such a view for managers in higher education?

Individuals enter an organization and adapt to the culture by adopting behaviors to which the organization has given sanction and legitimacy. The way the organization uses time is one cultural element that a new organizational participant will need to understand. The history of the organization structures everyday experience and the way the organization perceives of change. Claude Levi-Strauss notes the importance of history:

> "It is tedious as well as useless to amass arguments to prove that all societies are in history and change: that this is so is patent.... There is a risk of overlooking the fact that human societies react to this common condition in very different fashions. Some accept it, with good or ill grace, and its consequences assume immense proportion through their attention to it. Others seek ways to deny it and try to make the states of their development which they consider 'prior' as permanent as possible" [9, p. 234].

For example, three liberal arts colleges may react to the "common condition" of declining enrollments. One college may seek to broaden its appeal by adapting to new markets. The second college may try to clarify its original mission and

appeal to its traditional clientele. The third institution might try either strategy and fail. How the organization responds depends in large part on the dialectical interchange between the participants' historical reality and the "common conditions" of the surrounding environment.

Clearly, individual and organizational interpretations of history will vary. An actor within an organization appears in an interconnected web of relationships that existed prior to the individual's entrance in the organization, and the individual's interpretation and action on that structure. A college with a hundred year history, for example, will have a structure of the way the actors make decisions. A new actor who enters the organization will have to learn how the system functions at the same time the organization undergoes a transformation--however minute--in response to the entrance of a new actor.

Organizations, whether they be rigidly prescriptive, as for example a fundamentalist Bible college, or loosely affiliated, such as an urban community college, control, direct, and modify the behaviors of their members. Such control is neither mechanistic nor unidirectional. Individuals interact with the organization in numerous ways, yet organizations do not change because an individual wills that change. To believe that change is the direct result of an individual's actions is to deny the complex interplay and interrelationships among the organization, the larger social

history, the environment, and the placement of the actors within the organization.

When we consider organizations as socially created constructs we also can account for how organizations mediate time. An administrator encounters three different dimensions of organizational time that must be reckoned with simultaneously. These dimensions are: a) formal/informal, b) historical, and c) seasonal/ceremonial. The formal and informal use of time refers to how individuals structure their own time such as appointments and meetings versus dropping in for a visit. The most common examples of research on this kind of time are the theorists cited at the outset of the article, and writers such as Peters and Waterman [13], and Deal and Kennedy [5].

Historical time refers to the context of the past that individuals and organizations use as they consider how to react to environmental demands. That is, historical time structures how individuals respond to organizational dilemmas based on participant perceptions of the past [6].

Finally, seasonal and ceremonial time refers to what Berger and Luckmann [2] called a "facticity." They state, "The temporal structure of everyday life confronts me as a facticity with which I must reckon, that is, with which I must try to synchronize my own projects. I encounter time in everyday reality as continuous and finite. All my existence in this world is continuously ordered by its time, is indeed enveloped by it" [2, p. 27]. Seasonal and ceremonial time

pace individuals' reality so that they must try to "synchronize" their own projects. From this angle we note the opposing assumptions behind a cultural framework and an individualist framework. Whereas the latter assumes that an individual can direct organizational time, the former investigates organizational time and how it influences personal time management practices.

Organizational participants become cognizant of organizational time in a multitude of ways. The celebration of seasonal festivals, the beginning and ending of academic years, the progression of a cadre of students, the elevation of an individual to an important ceremonial post, catastrophes that strike unexpectedly, or minute activities such as informal time spent with a colleague in the cafeteria, all impart organizational meaning and can influence how the participants perceive of and act on the organization. What follows are different examples of temporality drawn from case studies of a year-long research project involving colleges and universities. We do not offer these examples to suggest how managers should utilize formal or informal time, or to suggest how administrators should incorporate ceremonies in their institution. The examples highlight how actors conceive of and utilize time, and how time management influences decision making and implementation.

Time in the cultural sense represents the broader context in which management of one's personal time operates. Conflict can occur when personal and organizational time are not in

synchrony with one another. The challenge in implementing any idea comes from recognizing that all decisions occur in a cultural context which can influence the decision and implementation. By understanding the culture, and in this case what its values are in relation to time, administrators can then choose to reinforce the culture or to influence it in a new direction.

Dimensions of Time

Informal and Formal Uses of Time

Informal and formal time use practices demonstrate how different institutions have cultural requisites with regard to how administrators spend their time. What one institution would regard as an inefficient use of administrative time is the expected way to conduct daily business at another institution.

The informal use of time refers to unplanned interchanges between management and different constituencies. For example, Family State College (all names are pseudonyms) has a president who relies extensively on the use of informal conversations and interactions with his constituencies in order to create a sense of institutional excitement. According to his secretary and a study of the presidential calendar, he schedules one and a half hours a day as "free time" to permit interactions with different constituencies. The president regularly schedules meetings with his executive circle, yet these meetings revolve around a mixture of both

formal, agenda-like items, and informal ideas of the president and his lieutenants. Although the president's schedule is very busy, individuals who want to see him in his office generally can arrange to do so within 48 hours.

The president is also highly visible on campus so that all constituencies can interact informally with him. As one individual noted, "Everything used to be fragmented here. Now there's a closeness. The reason is, he's everywhere. He'll just walk in your office and you never feel he's trying to catch you. He'll talk decisions out with you, you know where he stands." A student commented, "If a student hasn't gotten to know the president in a year, then it's the student's damn fault. Everybody sees him walking around here. He comes to all the events. He's really easy to see. That's what is special about Family State." Thus, the culture of Family State, as exemplified by the president, utilized informal time management practices.

We discovered another aspect of informal time at another public institution--Rural State College. Socialization occurred informally. A new faculty member commented on Rural State's socialization practices by a comparison to a larger university. At Rural State, "the dean was helpful in telling me what to do, everybody was. People just came by and told me how this gets done, and how to get something if I needed it for a class. At the University there were piles of documents that I could read. Requisition requests, committees, new faculty meetings. Here it's different. When I first arrived

everybody told me I could take coffee at 9:30. Take coffee? I'd never heard of such a thing, but everybody goes over and chats over coffee at 9:30. On Fridays at 3:00 some of us also go out for donuts as a way to unwind." Thus, the way one learned about the institution was chiefly by oral, informal processes.

In contrast, Covenant University exists in a highly formalized setting, in part because of a faculty union begun in 1975. One faculty member noted, "Before the union the university was a sandbox. In 'collegiality' administrators asked certain faculty members for their opinion over coffee. That makes those faculty feel good, but there was no accountability, no responsibility to a constituency."

In some ways the union has made decision making easier for the administration. An administrator commented on the formalized use of time and contrasted it with how administrators made decisions elsewhere. "At my previous institution it took me two years to get the curriculum committee to approve the curriculum for a new center. The faculty on the committee had some concerns, and they wouldn't budge until we got them resolved. Here as an administrator I could design a curriculum and submit it to the faculty. After 45 days I can implement it, no matter what the faculty say. All that matters is that I follow the procedure. I don't have to pay attention to what the faculty say."

The foregoing examples provide evidence not only of temporal differences in the management of different

institutions, but also indicate one building block of each organization's culture. At Family State College the president interacts on a casual basis with all constituencies, and he has an "open door" policy where participants can come to him with ideas and problems. Rural State College relies on informal processes to orient new members into the culture. Interaction between administrators and faculty occurs informally around the coffee table. Individuals at Covenant University point to conversation over coffee as one clue about why they felt powerless. Their culture demanded the formalized use of time so that all constituencies could feel they had access to formal avenues of power.

Historical Uses of Time

Another dimension of time is the way participants perceive of and use history. This dimension of time does not concern the way administrators spend their day, but rather how administrators use institutional history as a context for decision making. In one way or another, administrators must confront institutional history. As we shall see, one way an institution can adapt to environmental pressures is by augmenting programs that enhance institutional identity. Conversely, an institution may adapt to an environment by changing focus and mission. In both cases, however, historical time creates one factor in administrative decisions.

Institutional mission focuses our discussion of historical time. How do administrators broker the difference between institutional needs of the present with the temporal demands of the past? What are the consequences for administrators if they eschew institutional identity? Again, we do not present these examples as simplified solutions to complex problems; rather, we intend to show how history is a component of organizational time, and how it influences decision making.

At Family State College individuals spoke of the college's historical mission from two similar angles; either the mission referred to the balance between career-oriented and liberal arts programs, or people discussed the audience for whom the college had been founded--the local working class. The college created a nursing program that easily fit into the mission of the college as a course of study for working-class students. An Industrial Technology major is another example of a program that responded to the needs of the surrounding environment and catered to the specified clientele of the institution. Although people spoke about the mission in terms of both curriculum and clientele, the college's adaptation concerned programmatic change instead of abandoning the primary audience. Rather than alter the traditional constituency of the institution, the college created new curricular models which continued to attract the local working class.

The historical mission of Family State also provided a rationale for why individuals worked at a public college. The president commented, "Look, I'm a product of this kind of place. I didn't go to a private college. I believe in publicly supported education for children who otherwise would not be able to attend school. We still offer an education to first generation college students." A young administrator echoed the president's sentiments: "I went to a public college. In part I'm working here because I believe in what this kind of college has always stood for."

In contrast, Mission University's ideology has come into conflict with its curriculum. The institution exists in an area that has experienced rapid growth. Initially the institution was a small southern Catholic men's college. In the past two decades the institution has grown from 800 men to over 6,000 men and women. In 1985 its enrollment divided equally between undergraduate and graduate students. The institution has become a major university with multiple programs that struggle to maintain its historical identity and basic goals. "This institution faces an identity crisis" said one individual, "The professions are running away with the university."

The university has emphasized three guiding points in its mission: academic excellence, service, and values: "an education of the whole person, an education seeking to answer not only 'what is,' but 'what should be.'" By serving the needs of the high tech industry in the area the university

sees its current practice consistent with its historical mission. However, many perceive the institution to be at odds with institutional purpose. A faculty member said: "Their is no longer a clearly defined mission. We say quality education, but everybody says that. I don't know what we really stand for."

As the university utilizes adaptive planning in responding to the needs of the high-technology marketplace, different constituencies have pointed out apparent discrepancies between how they perceive institutional purpose and institutional function. Twenty years ago people interpreted the mission of the institution through the functions the university performed. White middle class young men attended a primarily undergraduate religious institution to enrich their religious beliefs and help serve mankind. The religious order taught the young men; religious services and a curriculum geared toward the liberal arts focused students' educational awareness on the distinctive character of the institution. Students applied to other religious colleges if they did not gain entrance to Mission.

Obvious changes have occurred. The chief institutional competitors are secular universities. Only 26 priests are on the faculty of over 250. Over half of the student body do not attend for religious purposes but in order to enhance their careers. The liberal arts are the weakest programs at the university and the institution emphasizes its adult graduate programs in business, law and engineering. One person added:

"It's a strange campus. It says it's liberal arts, but most come for a skill."

At Mission University an apparent dysfunction exists between how the participants view the institutional past and present. Family State College has an historical mission based on the kind of clientele they serve that translates into the rationale for institutional identity and purpose. Historical time, then, plays various roles in institutional culture.

History provides participants with an organizational saga that constantly demands interpretation in light of a changing environment. "A saga is indeed a switchman," notes Burton Clark "helping to determine the tracks along which action is pushed by men's self-defined interests" [3, p. 510]. Thus, our point is not that institutional identity as highlighted by a college's saga or mission cannot change, but rather that as change takes place historical time enters into administrative decision making as a key element.

Seasonal and Ceremonial Uses of Time

Organizations function within the larger context of seasonal time. Academic years 'begin' in August, and 'end' in May. The budget process and curricular decisions operate according to a seasonal calendar. An individual must have a 'good idea' at a particular point in time if that idea is to have a chance of becoming translated into an operationalized plan the next year.

Covenant University's union provides the institution not only with strict seasonal activities throughout the year, but also for a number of years. Contracts must be issued by a specific date, termination notices, tenure review and a host of other activities must be set up and administered by particular times. Negotiating a new contract occurs every five years so that certain years inevitably produce more tension than other years. Tension at a university heats up at one moment and cools off at another time not because of administrative time management policies, but rather because of the seasonal context in which the administrators must operate. Seasonal time also can anchor ceremonial activities.

Obvious ceremonies such as commencement mark the end of institutional years. At Mission University the participants continually mentioned the president's address at the beginning of the year as a key ceremony to indicate where the institution headed. One individual noted, "The president's talk at the start of the year is always the high point. Everyone is interested and involved because they know he's spent the whole summer working on the text." The implication of ceremonial time for the administrator is that many of the demarcated time periods of the year occur not by managerial discretion, but rather in accord with a larger sphere of activity within the organization and within the world of higher education. The administrators are again confronted with the "facticity" of time-oriented realities that are beyond their control.

Colleges and universities also have unique seasonal and ceremonial activities that serve explicit organizational functions. One problem that can arise occurs when administrators rely on individually-oriented time that violates the organization's conception of ceremonial time. At one institution, for example, Honor's Day and Founder's Day traditionally were in the fall. A new president and the new academic vice president decided to delay the ceremonies until springtime. They had proposed a massive overhaul of the academic and fiscal sides of the institution and they did not believe they had time to spend on Honor's Day or Founder's Day. In the words of the academic vice president, "Too much is going on right now. We need to focus on the academic changes. In the spring we can combine the two days and hold it at night. I want the Admissions office to use it as a recruiting tool for prospective students and their parents. We also won't waste two days right now...." The president and academic vice president notified the college community by memo that they had changed the days to the spring.

The community decried the move. One observer noted, "It's kind of chintzy if you ask me. It used to be really special and everything. Now it's just typical of the way they run things." Another person said, "Those days stand for what we're about. Everybody got involved, and in one fell swoop they just decided to get rid of them, tell us that we've got to stick to our desks. Well this college is more than just budget sheets, and they don't understand that."

Another example at the same institution concerns a "Cultural Night" that had become an important spring-time ceremony. One ethnic group was a sizeable constituency at the small, liberal arts college. A tradition had developed that the minority students held a dinner and dance for the college in the spring. Virtually everyone at the college attended the affair--faculty, staff, students, and administrators. During the year under study, however, the president was absent from the ceremony in order to raise funds at an alumni gathering. "She doesn't care," noted one individual. "This is a night for everybody, and she's saying it doesn't matter."

The point is not that seasonal or ceremonial time can not be changed. We do not intend to imply that Honors Day must be held on the same day every year, or that absence from a party signifies administrative indifference. Indeed, both examples highlight the good intentions of the administration. In one case an administrator wanted people to focus on what he perceived to be critical problems; in another case the administrator sought to raise funds for the financially-strapped institution. However, both examples point out the conflict between managers who utilize individual time and a collegiate culture that operates on seasonal and ceremonial time. Most importantly, by the end of the year the massive overhaul which the administration proposed had not taken place. The college community, especially the faculty, united against an administration that did not understand the culture of the organization. "They don't understand the way things

are done around here, that's all" summed up one individual. "We're willing to get behind them and work hard, but they've got to understand what this place is about."

Conclusion

We have seen how administrators can consider time management from a variety of perspectives. The analysis of formal and informal uses of time included observations of a president's "open door" policy and the formalized procedures of a unionized faculty. Historical time placed present actions in reference to the organizational past. The history of the institution as articulated through the mission or saga necessarily impinged on how participants decided to adapt to the changing environment. Seasonal and ceremonial time generated activities that demanded administrative awareness of the culture.

All of the dimensions of time point this analysis away from an individualistic model which places acts and events within demarcated periods bereft of institutional context. Popular principles of "time management" imply that managers can use such prescriptions of an organization's culture. The analysis presented here viewed time as one critical element in an organization's socially constructed reality. The view accounts for how society tempers and mediates change, and how the inner processes of the organization focus time within these larger spheres. Not to consider time from this perspective lessens our understanding of why organizational

participants arrive at particular decisions, conclusions, and crises.

Institutional conflict can be precipitated by different frames of time being in tension with one another. For example, a traditionally slow-changing institution can come into conflict with a rapidly changing environment. A new president who operates from formalized procedures can engender crisis in an institution where informality reigns supreme. A leader who ignores seasonal or ceremonial time frames can likewise prompt cultural conflict.

Our analysis assumes that the organizational universe does not exist for people except as it is thought. The environment, external constituencies, historical traditions, and the participants themselves all influence organizational time. The worldly circumstances of human action are under no obligation to conform to individualized categories about how to manage one's time.

Effective time management at one institution at one point in time would be entirely inappropriate at another institution, or even at the same institution at a later point in time. Rural State's informal time management, for example, would create conflict at a unionized institution. Indeed, Rural State's participants spoke highly of how administrators and faculty members daily converse "over coffee" and yet at Covenant University faculty members spoke with disdain about informal discussion. Honor's Day and Founder's Day were important ceremonies at one college, and were insignificant at

Mission University. What may appear inefficient--an Awards Day, casual conversation with a colleague over lunch, or a symbolic speech about what the institution stands for--may be effective forms for implementing administrative decisions. Conversely, efficient time management practices may prove to be ineffective because of the culture of the organization. The point is not that one form of time management is more efficient than another; rather, the imperative is that managers diagnose their institutions from a cultural viewpoint in order to understand how to effectively manage their time.

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